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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, the ways in which four ethnically diverse mothers' perceptions of early childhood education combined with the school experiences of their children were examined. Interviews with the four women, Mexican American, Korean American, African American, and Anglo, were recorded; school experiences were videotaped; and the written reactions of the mothers to a video message were used in the study. The Anglo mother-child dyad experienced the least discontinuity between the mother's perceptions and the child's school experiences, and the Mexican American dyad experienced the greatest discontinuity. The Korean American and African American dyads experienced similar discontinuity. The preferences of all four mothers for treating boys and girls differently differed from the teachers' practice of making no gender-based distinctions. The traditional written notice from the school was congruent only with the Anglo mother's needs. Overall, evidence of continuity outweighed evidence of discontinuity, suggesting that a majority-administered school can provide continuity. Ways of increasing the continuity between home perceptions and educational experience are discussed. Four tables summarize study findings. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)

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Perceptions of Home-School Continuity Among Culturally Different Parents

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Abstract

In this qualitative investigation, the ways in which four ethnically diverse mothers' perceptions of early childhood education combined with the school experiences of their children were examined. Research tools included audiotaped interviews with Mexican-American, Korean-American, African-American, and Anglo mothers; videotaped school experiences; and a video message with a viewing guide requesting written reaction.

The findings indicate that the Anglo dyad experienced the least discontinuity between the mother's perceptions and the child's school experiences, and the Mexican-American dyad experienced the greatest discontinuity. The Korean-American and African-American dyads experienced similar degrees of discontinuity, with both showing slightly less discontinuity than the Mexican-American dyad.

Findings further indicate that all four mothers' preferences for treating boys and girls differently varied from the teachers' practice of making no gender-based distinctions. Traditional written notices from the school appeared to be completely congruent with only the Anglo mother's information needs. The Mexican-American and Korean-American mothers experienced discontinuity in terms of their belief in the benefits of parent-teacher collaboration coupled with limited relationships with teachers. The Korean-American and African-American dyads shared discontinuity in terms of emphasis on drill and practice and the school's lack of drill and practice emphasis. Overall,

evidence of continuity outweighed evidence of discontinuity, suggesting that a majority-administered school can provide continuity.

The findings suggest further research and ways of increasing continuity. These include the use of personal and specific requests from the teacher directed to culturally diverse parents, pairing volunteer majority families with minority families, hiring bilingual teachers, experimenting with novel ways of communicating with parents, educating school staff with regard to non-Anglo cultures, seeking ways to work with early-academics oriented families, and serving ethnic foods at school.

Perceptions of Home-School Continuity Among Culturally Different Parents

Five issues contribute to the significance of this research: cultural diversity, home-school continuity, parent involvement, parent education, and research methodology. Thirty-one percent of all United States residents under the age of 18 years are minorities (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1992). African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics constitute a sizable portion of these statistics, thereby highlighting the importance of understanding parental perceptions within these cultures. For many minority children, high levels of incongruity correspond to lack of success in school (Feagans, 1982). Knowledge of maternal perceptions can inform educators of ways to (a) address incongruity, (b) foster parent involvement, and (c) define goals for parent education. This paper highlights the need for parents and school to address change together. Finally, this research verifies the use of self-report and videotaping as research tools.

Objectives

The purposes of this study were to (a) report the perceptions of four mothers regarding early childhood education as a function of their ideas on child rearing, education, and their children's current experiences in a preschool program; (b) depict the nature of the correspondence between the parents' perceptions and their children's actual school experiences; (c) suggest changes to increase the continuity between

parents' perceptions and children's actual school experiences and (d) make recommendations for future research.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

Parents' attitudes and children's school experiences have been studied separately and extensively. Yet, little was known about the relationship of minority parents' perceptions and their children's learning environments until recently. Ecological theorists (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Valsiner, 1987; Weber, 1889-1924/1947) imply that current research needs extension to describe and evaluate the relationship of these two components, particularly in terms of ethnic-minority parents' perceptions and their children's early school experiences. In-depth description of this dyad could provide a base for meeting future needs and establishing the home-school continuity in early childhood programs called for by Heath (1983), Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), Powell (1989), and Bowman (1992). Such description could also establish a base for scrutinizing the role of Piagetian (1926, 1952, 1954) theory in qualitative interviewing methodology.

Methods and Data Sources

Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) framework for qualitative research was adopted for this study: (a) question for meaning, (b) dynamic inductive data analysis, (c) focus on process, (d) researcher as primary research instrument, and (e) contextual description. The need for personal knowledge of mothers' perceptions suggested in-depth

interviews and a researcher-as-confidant relationship with participants, both familiar features of qualitative research methodology.

The population consisted of 60 children enrolled in a university-based school for young children, and their mothers. The school served families with children ages 3 through 5 years. Because the school served a variety of ethnic groups, a purposive sample of four mother-child dyads was selected to represent Mexican-American, Korean-American, African-American, and Anglo cultures.

Observations and video taping in the school and audiotaped interviews and informal visits with mothers and teachers served as the methods for collecting data. The total interview time for each mother ranged from about 3 to 7 hours--as long as each mother was willing to continue. The in-depth interviews were recorded verbatim in field notes. When verbatim notes were not feasible, key ideas were jotted down and reconstructed as soon as possible after leaving the field. Audiotape recordings of the interviews were also transcribed without delay. After all of the interviews had been completed, the mothers were asked to react in writing to a video program depicting interactions among parents, teachers, and young children in several cultures (Wozniak, 1991).

Time in the field spanned 12 weeks. The total taping time for each child equaled 3 school days. An additional day for each child was videotaped using time-interval techniques. The first 5 minutes out of every 15-minute period were documented as a check on outlier behavior.

The researcher, assisted by a tentative interview schedule and audio and video tape recorders, was the key research instrument. The interviews resembled reciprocal conversation in which an interested but uninformed listener asks a question, then probes to find out who, what, when, where, why, or how (Agar, 1980; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Spradley, 1979, 1980). No attempt was made to incorporate standardized instruments into the design in a standard way, for the goal of qualitative research is to better understand human behavior in a particular naturalistic context, rather than to verify a theory under conditions that imply generalizability to the population (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Data analysis was an on-going process, concurrent with data collection as well as succeeding collection. Throughout the analysis, field note reflection contributed to evolving patterns (Tesch, 1990). After reflective comments were added to the field notes, emerging patterns were indicated and field notes were summarized regularly. Flexible patterns contributed to the formation of preliminary categories of mothers' perceptions and children's experiences that, in turn, guided data collection. Other analysis techniques also contributed to the study's value.

First, gathering data from a number of sources to corroborate findings provided triangulation. Thus, data collected from mothers were examined for likenesses and differences from data gathered from teachers. Similarly, mothers and teachers were asked to substantiate

or refute many of the researcher's impressions and the evolving hypotheses. In addition, numerical data were retained as a means of clarifying and validating written data (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Second, data were categorized according to mothers' perceptions and children's experiences. Similar perceptions and experiences were clustered into chunks that were provisionally coded and recoded. Data reduction resulted from combining seemingly unrelated data into one category for further evaluation. Two other trained researchers reviewed the data to foster inter-rater reliability in regard to the categorizations. If data were inappropriately matched, they were recoded. If they were incomplete, the source was revisited for further data.

Results and Points of View

In general, the researcher found cultural differences in regard to amounts of congruity and incongruity. These variables could be placed in a wide variety of categories, including beliefs about how children learn, purpose of school, school environment, parent-child interaction, parents as teachers, priorities, philosophy of teaching, language, independence, cultural connections, current experiences, activities, pride, expectations, first school, yellow pages, observation, written notices, school network, motivation, support, logistics, feelings, and teaching strategies. These results are detailed in the attached tables. Each of the following results precedes the author's subsequent conclusions and points of view.

Congruity/Incongruity--Cultural Comparisons

The Anglo mother and her son experienced the least discontinuity between the mother's perceptions and the child's school experiences. The Mexican-American mother and her daughter experienced the greatest discontinuity. The Korean-American and African-American mothers and their children experienced similar degrees of discontinuity, with both dyads showing slightly less discontinuity than the Mexican-American dyad. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 provide an overview of specific issues and degrees of continuity for each dyad.

Gender Differences

All four mothers' preferences for treating boys and girls differently were at least slightly incongruent with their children's school experiences, where teachers seemed to make no gender-based distinctions.

Shared Discontinuity

Mexican-American and Korean-American mothers appeared to share discontinuity in terms of their belief in the benefits of parent-teacher collaboration compared to their limited relationships with teachers. The Korean-American and African-American dyads seemed to share discontinuity in terms of their preference for drill and practice and the school's lack of emphasis on drill and practice.

Congruity With Other Research Findings

The results of this study support the work of Hess, Price, Dickson, and Conroy (1981); Knudsen-Kindauer and Harris (1989); and

Rescorla (1991). The findings suggest that some parents place more value on early academic skills, as evidenced in drill and practice exercises than do teachers.

Implications for the Setting

Evidence of continuity between mothers' perceptions and their children's school experiences outweighed evidence of discontinuity, suggesting that a school administered by the majority population can provide families with significant continuity. Yet, although all parents in this study reported conversations with teachers, none reported personal, specific teacher requests for particular goods or services which were useful in the classroom. Minority families may benefit from being asked to provide inexpensive items such as ethnic food samples for tasting, simple artifacts, or other objects of pride.

Also in the interest of promoting a social network for minority children and their parents, volunteer majority families could be paired with minority families. Care should be taken to communicate goals of mutual sharing and respect for each culture. A child and parent who speak English as a second language could benefit from relationships with teachers who speak the family's native language fluently. Teachers who are not bilingual can support families by learning greetings and the correct pronunciation of names.

Traditional written notices were completely congruent with only the Anglo mother's information needs. Evidence suggests that novel ways of communicating with parents tend to be more effective than

traditional written notices. The school's practice of formatting information to resemble tickets for a free picnic seemed to provide an effective memory clue.

Parents' and teachers' views of early academics constitute another topic for clear communication. Schools that do not support the use of drill and practice in early childhood education can communicate to parents that their children are learning in other ways, but mainly teachers need to attend more to parents' perceptions.

Theoretical Issues

The results of this study suggest that Piaget's (1926) theory be considered as a tool for understanding parents' perceptions for a number of reasons. For example, the mothers frequently explained their views of education in terms of concrete experiences, such as classroom observation. Also, four unique views of education emerged, partly because each mother appeared to actively engage in a construction of reality that, according to Piaget (1954), could not be imposed from without.

All four mothers showed evidence of having constructed personal beliefs from their collective cultures (Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992). The Mexican-American and Korean-American mothers' views reflected a reverence for tradition and cooperative relationships such as those usually found in Eastern culture. The African-American and Anglo mothers seemed to value both cooperative relationships and the

individualism that characterizes Western culture (Weber, 1889-1924/1983).

Suggestions for Future Research

Studies may be undertaken to (a) identify ways of facilitating home-school interaction in the presence of language differences, with questions such as, "Which tools communicate the school's intentions most effectively to which parents, and why?" (b) scrutinize minority children's observation of other children in the classroom; (c) evaluate parents' perceptions and children's experiences before and after efforts to address discontinuity issues in early childhood classrooms; (d) describe changes in mothers' perceptions and young children's school experiences throughout the primary grades; (e) include fathers' perceptions and their correspondence to young children's school experiences; (f) measure the correspondence of perceptions and experiences in schools that are not university based; and (g) investigate cultures not addressed in this study to determine the match between parents' perceptions and young children's school experiences.

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Table 1

Home-School Continuity Summary for the Mexican-American Dyad

Discontinuity 13 times

- Children's learning by asking questions
- Cafeteria provisions
- Room decor
- Toilet facilities
- Special requests for specific parent participation
- Language differences
- Friendships with other school families
- Traditional written notices
- Gender-based treatment
- Ethnic foods

Minimal continuity 1 time

- Teachers as information sources

Limited continuity 2 times

- Parent-teacher collaboration

Continuity 71 times

- All other perceptions

Table 2

Home-School Continuity Summary for the Korean-American Dyad

Discontinuity 9 times

- Extrinsic rewards
- Drill and practice exercises
- Academic skills
- Contact with teachers
- Responsibility for cultural differences
- Korean foods
- Gender role expectations

Minimal continuity 1 time

- Traditional written notices

Limited continuity 3 times

- Expectations for respect
- Goals for independence
- Social styles in communication

Continuity 33 times

- All other perceptions

Table 3

Home-School Continuity Summary for the African-American Dyad

Discontinuity 10 times

- Drill and practice exercises
- Classroom and playground space
- Desks
- Written notices
- Drill and memorization taught through discipline, gruffness and negative reinforcement
- Gender role expectations

Minimal continuity 0 times

Limited continuity 2 times

- Structure as a priority for learning
- Computer use

Continuity 40 times

- All other perceptions

Table 4

Home-School Continuity Summary for the Anglo Dyad

Discontinuity 2 times

Kindergarten and its implications for families

Kindergarten and its implications for Springfield

Minimal continuity 1 time

Gender-based treatment

Limited continuity 2 times

Public kindergarten and its implications

Feelings related to parenting

Continuity 28 times

All other perceptions